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DEPARTMENT FOR PRM F/O, NEA/ELA, NEA/I

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS REFUGEE SITREP 7

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¶1. (SBU) CIRCUIT RIDE WRAP-UP: IOM reports that for the circuit ride 9 August - 25 September, DHS/USCIS approved 480 cases (1359 individuals) and denied 43 cases (152 individuals). No decision was made in 89 cases (312 individuals). DHS team leader Frank Minnick said that this approval rate of 81.5% was much higher than anticipated. Minnick expressed surprise at the high incidence of medical problems among the cases during this circuit ride.

¶2. (SBU) DHS/USCIS FACILITIES: The nine member DHS/USCIS refugee processing team arrived October 29 without incident and started interviewing November 2. Renovations to the new UNHCR building are near completion. The new facilities include space for 11 interview rooms (the current team will only utilize seven). The DHS/USCIS team arriving in January 2009 plans to make use of all available interviewing space.

¶3. (SBU) PANEL PHYSICIANS: Our consular section is now reviewing resumes and coordinating with the Center for Disease Control to identify qualified doctors and expand the number of approved panel physicians. These physicians will work with refugee processing only. They will not assist with Post's regular medical examinations for immigration visas. Contracts for post's current three physicians were renewed for FY2009.

¶4. (SBU) REFUGEES "TAKE FLIGHT" FROM SYRIA: Poloff monitored the first free flight ferrying Iraqi refugees back to Baghdad on October 15. Roughly 200 Iraqis participated in this repatriation program organized and carried out by the Iraqi Embassy in Syria. Many of the returnees were children, and all appeared in good health and spirit. According to diplomatic contacts in the Iraqi Embassy, the chartered Cham Wings flight cost the Iraqi government nearly 100,000 USD. The refugees gathered at the Iraqi Embassy, where five coaches were stationed to transport them to the Damascus International Airport. Several print media and news outlets monitored the departure. According to Iraqi Embassy contacts, a second flight took place on October 25, carrying a similar load of returnees.

¶5. (SBU) GOI PRESSURES FOR IRAQI RETURNS: Iraqi Embassy contacts report the Iraqi MFA has been "pressuring" them to push forward with a more robust returnee program and claim UNHCR is "not doing enough" to assist with the return of refugees. Iraqi Embassy representatives also criticized SARG "obstacles" to the Iraqi government's return program, such as not allowing the Iraqi government to advertise the return program in print or television media. UNHCR representatives report that UNHCR is not actively encouraging returns, but it

will assist any Iraqi who wishes voluntarily to return to Iraq. UNHCR representatives report the establishment of a return desk at the UNHCR registration site in Duma, where those seeking to return can receive detailed information on the program. UNHCR says that several hundred Iraqis have approached the return desk seeking information.

¶6. (SBU) UNHCR DIRECTOR: Charge met with UNHCR's Radhoune Nouicer, Director for North Africa and the Middle East on 19 October. Nouicer said that there was no pressure or interference from the SARG on UNHCR Syria, and that the SARG is providing acceptable protection space for the refugees. Nouicer also said the GOI is most likely pressuring refugees to return, though he assessed Iraq was not sufficiently prepared to absorb them. Laurens Jolles, UNHCR chief in Syria, added that UNHCR does work with the GOI, but some Iraqi officials in the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement have their own agenda and are seeking to publicize mass returns, though actual returns have been much smaller. Nouicer and Jolles commented that an October 19 GOI-arranged return by air (19 October) went more smoothly than the previous attempt by bus in November 2007. Jolles also reported UNHCR was preparing contingency plans in case UNHCR to begin to observe mass returns to Iraq, adding that UNHCR wants to be forward leaning on this sensitive issue.

¶7. (SBU) UNHCR CAP PREVIEW: On October 22, the UN Country Team presented an estimate of its 2009 Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) funding request for Syria. Final numbers are set to be released sometime in December 2008. For calendar year 2009, the UN will be seeking to spend roughly 217 million USD on a wide range of assistance programs targeting the Iraqi refugee population in Syria. UNHCR reports there have been some "grumbles" from European donors about the price tag of the 2009 CAP.

¶8. (SBU) CHRISTIAN IRAQIS SEEK REFUGE IN SYRIA: UNHCR Public Information Officer Sybella Wilkes reported UNHCR had information on 45 Christian families (roughly 200 people) who fled the Mosul area of Iraq in search of protection in Syria in the wake of reported violent activity in the area. UNHCR staff members had reportedly traveled up north to monitor the situation and register these families. Wilkes added that UNHCR had received reports that Iraqi Christians who tried to enter Syria experienced difficulties in acquiring Syrian entry visas - with many of the families not having the necessary paperwork to enter. Wilkes surmised that there are many more who wanted to enter and were unable to do so because of visa restrictions.

¶9. (SBU) AL-TANF CONDITIONS WORSEN: According to UNHCR representatives, the dire humanitarian situation in the Iraqi Palestinian camp of Al-Tanf became even more acute after severe flooding. Heavy rains drenched the tents of some 800 Iraqi Palestinians. Raw sewage leaked throughout the camp and electricity supplies were cut. The UN dispatched emergency workers and supplies, and UN contacts report they have the necessary funding to assist these desperate refugees. UNHCR continues to work with prospective resettlement countries.

¶10. (SBU) SAVE THE CHILDREN U.S. OPTIMISTIC ABOUT OPENING IN SYRIA: A/DCM Novinger and Poloff met October 28 with Save the Children U.S. Middle East/Eurasia Area Director Tom Tauras and heard about the organization's plan to establish operations in Damascus. During his visit, Tauras met with Syrian Arab Red Crescent President Attar and the UN Country Team. Tauras expressed optimism about opening a Damascus office and believed the SARG appeared willing to grant the necessary licenses, which could come within six to eight weeks. Tauras noted Save the Children Sweden, in coordination with the Swedish Ambassador, had been instrumental in erasing the ill-will that followed the abrupt departure of Save the Children U.K. earlier in the year. Tauras reported Save the Children U.S. would be working under the auspices of Save the Children Sweden and planned to focus its efforts on early childhood education (children under 6 years of age) as well as addressing child exploitation issues

among the Iraqi refugee community. UNHCR Representative Jolles told Tauras the UN would have funds available for these programs based on the spending proposals outlined in the 2009 CAP.

11. (SBU) VISITORS: Post recently supported the visits of Sharon Waxman from Senator Kennedy's office and is grateful to PRM for lending us Adrienne Nutzman. We also met with International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) President John Klink and ICMC Secretary General Johan Ketelers. UNHCR is hosting a delegation from EU member states this week. The delegation is comprised of EU-country immigration authorities here to gather facts on resettlement needs, with the aim of recommending an Iraqi refugee resettlement an EU target number that EU members would seek to fill on a voluntary basis.

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